Two inspiring tales from Tuensang in Nagaland

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Communitisation of primary education and shared banking system – the initiatives of a voluntary organisation that has created impact

The two inspiring tales of Tuensang below need somewhat detailed introduction as these are very important tales in the context of Nagaland and the North-East.

Tuensang is one of the three districts of Nagaland, which are adjacent to Myanmar (Burma). Situated in the North-East of Nagaland, it is inhabited by four Naga tribes namely Changs, Sanatams, the Khiemungans, the Yimchungers and other minor groups. It is one of the less developed districts of Nagaland but is progressing at a good pace. It is said that Tuensang falls on the route followed for drug trafficking. Prevalence of drug addiction, alcoholism and HIV/AIDS is considerable in this district.

The two inspiring stories that we are carrying in this issue of ISHANI are related to those persons who were victims of addiction of different kinds. This is an interesting and encouraging account of the rehabilitation that has taken place. The motivating force behind the encouraging development is a voluntary social service organisation known as Eleutheros Christian Society (ECS). The first of the two stories is about the good work that the ECS is doing in Tuensang. The two main initiatives of the ECS that are dealt with are the communitisation of primary education and the shared banking system. These accounts tell us about the positive developments in Nagaland.

A word about communitisation. The state government is following communitisation as a matter of policy all over Nagaland. ISHANI has plans to tell more about this initiative which has great potential. The Tuensang example is more successful as a dedicated voluntary organisation is acting as a facilitator and a guiding spirit. We invite readers to go through the details given in the article.

The second story “Retrievers’ Association” is also highly encouraging. It is an account of how the addicts were retrieved from the vice of drugs and how they have become self-reliant. They have reintroduced the old Naga value of dignity of labour. ECS is the moving spirit behind this development also.

In strife-torn Nagaland the two stories from Tuensang kindle hope for the future of the state.

This introduction will be incomplete without a reference to the founders of ECS, Chingmak Kejong and his wife, Phutoli. The couple is unique in Nagaland as they have stayed away from the pursuit of power and wealth. They have opted to render selfless service to the society. Both were students of Christian Theology and so it was natural for them to choose a Christian name for their organisation. Their main aim is the socio-economic development of the people of Tuensang. They have no evangelistic Agenda. I know the couple since the
Eleutheros Christian Society (ECS) came into existence in 1993 as a voluntary organization based in Tuensang, Nagaland. The organization came into being with a vision to contribute to the eradication of drug problem in the area, but in the course of their work, they discovered that helping drug addicts was not enough. It was further discovered that problems like drug-abuse is a symptom of some larger socio-economic backwardness, ignorance and illiteracy. Finding the extreme poverty situation to be the root cause of drug addiction problem, ECS started to focus on village institution building to work towards capacity building of the community.

ECS also enjoys the popularity among the tribal communities in the district. From top government officials to members of civil society organizations, ECS is well known for the development processes it is able to create amongst the communities. Its good image is the result of a dedicated founder secretary, Mr. Chingmak Kejong and his wife Phutoli Chingmak. They have consciously upheld a value system, which is replicable among other NGOs today. The team spirit among their staff is also something worth emulating. ECS has very few staff turnover and their effective community organization is impacting positively the lives of the marginalized people. Some of the most significant achievements of ECS are shared below.

**Communitization of primary education:**

The development paradigm today is to attain maximum participation of the poorer community so that the impact of any development on them will be sustainable. Most government programmes fail to impact adequately on the poor because the people at the grassroots have not participated in the planning and decision-making process. One of the great learnings of the ECS intervention is that of making the communities participate in managing some of the government Institutions like the Village Primary Schools and Primary Health Centres. The village communities transformed the education scenario in the district. The dysfunctional government Institutions have been converted into exemplary successful, vibrant educational institutions through the active participation of the village communities.
The Process: Each village has set up a Village Welfare Forum (VWF) which is a Committee that supervises the education process in the village schools. The school building and the teachers are supported by the government, while the village community ensures the functionality and regularity of the schools. The role of the committee is to:

1. Ensure children’s attendance and take punitive action against absentees and indiscipline.
2. Ensure the regularity and punctuality of the teachers and take appropriate action with the ZEO or higher authorities, and to recommend transfers, awards etc.
3. Ensure school uniforms, textbooks, and other stationeries.
4. Ensure cleanliness of the school compound. Movement of domestic animals are now regulated so that the village is cleaner.
5. Look to the welfare of teachers by even constructing staff quarters and providing other amenities like water supply, firewood etc.
6. Help poor families to cope with financial requirements for uniforms and textbooks. The Committee often collects Re.1/ per family to give financial aid to the poor families who would rear chickens or pigs so as to get sufficient funds for meeting the educational expenses of the children.
7. The VWF regulates study hours in the evening and morning.
8. The committee interacts closely with government officials so that the education process is improved.
(9) Help to organize school events.

The whole community is involved in the education of the children. There are no drop-outs any more since the Committee finds ways to overcome the threats. In many villages the Self Help Groups (SHG) have been keenly taking part in the education process. The SHGs have offered to pay the salary of an additional teacher in many schools. Moreover in some villages the SHGs have donated white boards with marker pens replacing the chalk and the blackboards to safeguard better health of the students. The recurring expenses of the marker pens and dusters are also taken care of by the SHGs. In some village schools again, computer has been introduced which is donated by either the church, village women society or the SHGs.

A community that consciously takes interest in the education of their young will be conquerors. The VWF is a policing body to monitor the study hours in the village. One or two individuals are appointed to scout the village after a bell is sounded to ensure that all students remain indoors and study their lessons. This has proved to be result-oriented because now young and old are making tremendous progress. Absenteeism is becoming rare, pass percentage has shot up and drop-out cases have been brought to NIL.

What about teachers’ attendance? Teachers are becoming most responsible and disciplined. They painstakingly adhere to the dictates of the VWF and apply to VWF for leave of absence. The district education offices have no more to worry about teacher’s indiscipline, they now merely refer back to the VWF. The VWF duly rewards or punishes the teachers with their objective recommendation to the authorities.

The government property has better durability and longevity now, since the VWF has promptly taken action whenever required. Since the whole village community has looked upon the school as a sacred property, no one would dare to damage the government building anymore. This sentiment needs to be reconstructed.

The concept of the communitization was developed with ECS and IGSSS way back in 1997. The little experience of community-managed educational process that IGSSS staff had, was instrumental in sowing the seed among the community. And today the communitization of primary education that is happening in the remote Tuensang, is something replicable anywhere else in India.

**Introduction of shared banking system (EDOU)**

One of the greatest milestones for ECS since 2002 has been the introduction of shared banking within the SHG groups. The unique localized bank was opened on March 10, 2003 with the SDO (Civil) of Tuensang, Mr. Lichemse as the chief guest and the General Manager SBI, Mr. Narsari, as the guest of honor. In the words of the chief guest, “true independence can only be realized if every individual inculcated the spirit of self-sufficiency without harming others”.

The word “EDOU” is derived from the Chang Naga language, which refers to the concept of “farming together”. Since shifting cultivation was and is still practised
on a large scale, people had to move from place to place after few years. Hence, the idea was to work together in each other’s field. Thus, the concept of “togetherness” was retained with innovative changes being introduced for the formation of the present SHGs. Instead of the conventional method of banking where the interest goes to the bank, the unique and dynamic feature of EDOU is that the interest goes back to the group as a dividend after every three years. One of the problems faced by all SHGs was that when a particular member could not pay the loan on time it has a drastic impact on the group’s economic growth, and other members could not get access when they were in need. In order to rectify this problem, presently the shares are divided into three categories.

During its formative years though ECS approached many banking agencies and agriculture banking, none was forthcoming. The negative response from the said agencies inspired the Director to evolve a system of shared banking thereby becoming their own bank to re-finance their own group’s savings and also retain the interest within their own banks rather than paying the benefits to financial and other banks. Altogether 17 SHGs responded and invested 30% to 50% of their savings to form the ECS EDOU bank with a working capital amount of around Rs.3 lakhs. Today, the group saving circulation comes up to more than Rs.20 lakhs purely on savings without any government or bank aid. Out of the total 17 groups, 8 were selected for the first phase and the first group received 75% more as against their investment and the interest incurred would go as dividend to the group after 3 years.

**Changes at the Social Level:**

Woman groupings described as “Sleeping Giants” are slowly waking up in this little known Tuensang areas. The women SHG federation prevailed on the District administration to ban the lottery and all gambling and now the town is quieter and more serious about work. Social interaction among women has increased considerably and social cohesion is promoted through the SHG fellowships.

Women are finally finding their voice in their society, and families. They are becoming much more expressive and demonstrative. They also now contribute a lot to decision-making even in the families. The SHG movements focusing on a holistic approach to socio-economic development is providing a new alternative to the marginalized communities.

There is a sense of belonging and comfort among all, knowing that one is not alone. Being a part of SHG has also infused in them a strong sense of social commitment towards their community. Today many mothers could testify their achievement, and have visualized their rights and responsibilities and asserted access to existing privileges.
Retrievers’ Association: Path-breaking venture
An association of youth who were retrieved from addiction.

A group of Naga Youth is taking a path-breaking initiative in Tuensang with the motto, “Live Honestly and Earn Decently”. Gone are the days when relatives at home dreaded the advent of evening when their “wayward” boys used to reach home and disturb the family with their unruly behaviour. The stigma of being branded “frivolous and troublesome” or a “drug-addict” is also a thing of the past. Aged parents and young housewives await the return of the “bread-winner” of the family every evening. These youth earn a living for themselves and their families by the sweat of their brows, by carrying loads on their backs or with their hand-pulled wooden carts. The youth have taken to manual labour and menial jobs, giving a new meaning to the fast disappearing work culture in their society.

The Retrievers’ Association was formed in 1998 by some educated and uneducated youth of Tuensang. They formed themselves into an association to earn their living through jobs such as porters with their hand-pulled carts. They are now replacing the traditional porters, barbers, shoe-repairers, who are mainly migrants from the plains. Members of the Retrievers’ Association are Naga youth numbering more than 70 and serving the community. Most of the members have hand-pulled wooden carts with cycle wheels imported from neighbouring Assam. Some are contemplating setting up manufacturing and assembling unit and repair shop for these vehicles. They also perform other menial jobs to augment their income. Some of them have now started hair-cutting saloons, tea stalls and shoe-repair shops, etc. This sort of work was looked down upon, if not abhorred by the Naga youth earlier. The Association has taken a path-breaking initiative, and its members have realized the dignity of labour. They have also realized how honourable it is to earn money by own efforts, instead of taking money from parents by force or earning through any kind of malpractice.

The Association has a set of rules and a code of conduct for its members. Each member is to have a Khaki uniform shirt with a number plate. They have to strictly abide by the code of conduct, and any breach of conduct, if reported by customers or the public quoting the number plate on the shirts, would be punished with expulsion or fine. An executive committee monitors the members’ conduct and performance. The business is thriving. The members work on loading and unloading of goods trucks, buses, and take grocery, building materials and other goods for home delivery in their hand-pulled carts. Each person earns between Rs.200/- to 500/- per day on an average. Each member is also putting aside Rs.10/- everyday as saving, and one of the executive members maintain the accounts in a bank. They are happy with their profession and there are hardly any dropouts among the members, while some have already moved upward to become petty traders and entrepreneurs. Members have even expressed their willingness to migrate to towns to help set up such examples for other youth.
How did the community respond to this change of attitude of youth towards work? Overjoyed to see their own youth engaged in sincere work of earning the public responded by providing avenues and creating enough work. An elderly person doubled the wage agreed upon of a young Retriever who reached the goods to his home. The elders said that he is so happy to see the young man doing this work with dignity. The families of these youth also experienced a transformation. The fear and suspicions on the part of the family members melt away, and love, acceptance and cooperation is the precious harvest. The testimony of one of the members speaks volumes; “Earlier my parents dreaded my coming home and I used to loathe to face the pain and displeasure of the family, but now things have changed. They eagerly await my home coming, because I bring the needed monetary support for the family. Now I am accepted and loved and I am finally happy”.

This is a great transformation indeed. It was is 1994 that I first visited Tuensang when the grey haired Town Committee chairperson spoke in between sobs of the great tragedy that has befallen the youth. He said that “in 365 days some 408 youth have died due to overdose of drug or of AIDS”. Today such things do not happen anymore.

The Retrievers’ Association was felicitated by the Eleutheros Christian Society (ECS) Tuensang, in collaboration with the Indo-Global Social Society (IGSSS), who has been facilitating the NGO through small funds and capacity building of staff, community leaders and youth leaders. ECS is a distinguished NGO in Tuensang district. It is one of the few NGOs that are making remarkable impact on the socio-economic, cultural and educational scenario in the Tuensang district of Nagaland. The Retrievers’ Association was also facilitated by the IGSSS through small funding in supporting the purchase of the hand-carts, and providing seed money for starting small ventures like opening of tea-stalls, hair cutting saloons and the likes. IGSSS is also setting up a small capital to establish a “sweet fund” to provide small loans to up-coming entrepreneurs from among the Retrievers.

A 28-minute documentary film has been produced by IGSSS on the activities of Retrievers’ Association in 2004. The Governor of Nagaland honoured it by organising a meeting of dignitaries and releasing the film in the Durbar Hall at the Governor’s Palace, Kohima, on the 9th of October 2004. The film has been put to good use since by screening in different youth events to motivate other youth.

Indeed, given the abhorrent attitude of the youth towards manual labour in general, and the profession of porters or coolies in particular, the activities of the Retrievers’ Association, Tuensang, is a pertinent reminder that living by the sweat of one’s brow is one right path to follow.

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